

“Vacation Gone Wrong?”

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Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

June 20, 2010 (Father’s Day)

The only time I’ve been in North Dakota was on a family vacation to Minnesota as a boy. We were on our way home from Ottertail County to Milwaukee and while my mother told my dad she was sure we were going the wrong direction he wouldn’t turn around until we saw the little sign on the state highway saying, “Welcome to North Dakota.” This was not a welcome sign for us to see. In fact just a hundred yards or so into North Dakota we made a u-turn without any comment and drove east toward home. Like my cousin’s husband who fainted 3 times at their wedding and had to finish his vows on a chair it was never mentioned again (well, until this sermon, I suppose).

This being Father’s Day and all there should be no murmur from the assembled as to the number of times families have been led to destinations undesired because of failure to ask for directions. Certainly the little band following Jesus were unhappily landed in the “country of the Gerasenes” we are introduced to in our Gospel this morning. While not, technically, “on a vacation,” the disciples have been traveling in Galilee – not by plane, train or automobile but on foot and by boat.

It had been quite a night before their arrival in the land of the Gerasenes. They’d been making a night crossing of the sea of Galilee – the great inland lake nestled in a vast hollow created by low mountains on all sides. Back then, as it continues to this day, the wind would whip through the cliffs and stir the sea into hellacious storms, one of which, according to Luke, had just happened—a storm that found the disciples bailing for their lives and Jesus asleep on the ballast bag in the stern until their cries woke Him up and He stilled the storm, leaving them “amazed and afraid” (that’s the words Luke used) wondering just what kind of man could control winds and waves with simply a word.

The storm suddenly and supernaturally dissipated the disciples still pumped on adrenaline find they have landed on the “wrong” side of the sea of Galilee, the east side, where good Jews never went because the people were pagan and the pigs were plentiful.

This wasn’t classist snobbery: Merely stepping foot in this land was a religious crime against the Temple. Most Christians have a “come as you are” attitude toward their religion—that’s why they all like to sing “Just as I am without one plea.” But the Jews had a complex and complicated system where sin and sinners were so contagious that conscientious Jews did their best to avoid both.

It is not without purpose that Luke wrote that only Jesus got out of the boat. This detour went way beyond ending up in North Dakota. The rest of this traveling band of balking disciples was hanging back, hoping, I suppose, against hope that Jesus would realize they were not where they were supposed to be surrounded by things better left unseen and people not worthy of His presence and that He'd get back in the boat. But it was unlike Him to take them to places without purpose – still, what could the purpose be?

True to His nature of leading them in unexpected directions against all that they'd held onto to give their lives stability and focus Jesus doesn't come back to the boat. He takes a few more steps and is met by someone as fearsome to these fellows as a storm at sea: the Gerasene's wild and wacky "Welcome Wagon," a stark naked raving man, possessed by demons, who had made his home in the cliff-side caves that served as graves for the people in this region. Now, if you'd like to keep score as the Pharisees always did of the atrocities perpetrated by Jesus, the Messiah has just committed 3 offenses against the purity laws of Judaism: He'd stepped into a graveyard and was too close to the corruption of a demon-possessed unclothed corpse companion.

Sensory overload for the still-damp from nearly being drowned disciples, I'd say – the bunch back in the boat watching in wonder and amazement knew they weren't in Galilee anymore. Why, they had to wonder, was Jesus so close to a hopeless case who wasn't even from among God's chosen people? There had to be demon possessed graveyard dwellers somewhere in Israel that He could find. Why here? Why him?

His own people had tried to help him. He had been kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles but the demons inside of him were so strong they broke the chains and drove him out of the city to the caves. Someone, at some time, had tried to keep this man among the company of others but they had failed.

But those who had ministered to him in the past did not have the power that Jesus had. In a strange twist, at this rather early time in the public ministry of Jesus, while He is relatively unknown and no one has publicly concluded He is the "son of the Most High God" the demons call Jesus by name. That is significant, you see, because 2,000 years ago, it was believed that knowing the name of a being gave you control over them. For the demons to name Jesus as the son of God, was to own/control Him, or so they thought?

God will not be owned – nor God's Son. God cannot be bargained with – nor His Son, for the Son is as the Father. Not even legions of demons could own Jesus simply by speaking His name. One legion could contain up to 6,000 soldiers. This one man was possessed by legions – a concentration of the vilest powers of hell. This is not just an illness spoken of here but evil – real evil, infectious evil that only God-made-flesh could conquer. Jesus didn't come to conquer bad attitudes and poor choices. He came to defeat Satan and the powers of hell - a real and active enemy to this day.

Demons begging – an interesting picture. Somewhere before the foundations of the world this scene had played out in another scene/place/dimension – we don't really know. Were they asking not to be cooped up until Judgment Day? I've read that begging Jesus to be sent into a herd of pigs that promptly jumped off a cliff meant that unclean demons inside unclean animals wanted to go where Jesus had no power over them but there is no such place.

“He who is in us is greater than ‘he’ who is in the world.” Jesus' power, Jesus' reign is over all – the power of Satan remains only until His soon return. This scene is not about “ham on the lam” or “bobbing for bacon.” Jesus wasn't lost or in the wrong place in Gerasene. His command over demons is shown in awesome power leaving the natives "seized with fear" and wanting Him to leave (think of Peter saying, “get away from me, I am an unclean man”). In the face of the pure and holy power of God that is the natural response of sinful people.

But it is sinful people, called and claimed, redeemed and loved by God who are privileged to go where Jesus went, to do what Jesus did – to live in the power and with the power of His name, marked by our baptism. Where God called us by name and claimed us to be His own. This is where we all enter this picture.

By faith, in the power of the Spirit we are called to go where angels fear to tread, to lay down our lives for strangers and enemies, to take on the world's craziness in the hope God's love through us will make a difference.

I can fully understand why this man, newly-healed and freed from legions of evil demons begged Jesus to let him tag along. What I couldn't understand is why Jesus refused him until the Gospel made it clear. Our mission is not to stay, but to go - not in the wrong direction toward any Dakota but always toward those in need of the Gospel.

Here with each other, we confess our faith in creeds and prayers and its' comfortable; its safe; its just what we want religion to be: kind of like staying on the right side of the sea and away from pagans and pig-herders and all the things that seize us with fear.

But that's not faith and that's not following. To follow Jesus you've got to leave; not leave Him—He promised that wherever we are, He is, but leave our comfort zones, where everything is “normal” and “predictable.” Never be astounded at what God's grace can do – and it doesn't have to be in a faraway place. Three weeks ago at T-Mobil a homeless person came in to look at things – to get warm, it was a cold night. I noticed a man look her in the eye and talk to her. I complimented him on the interaction. Most people just look away. We talked for awhile. I told him I was a pastor and that we'd had a homeless shelter at the church I served in Chicago. He told me that just a few months ago he'd been on the street, just like the woman we'd seen in the store. He told me the only reason he wasn't still there was because of Jesus.

I knew his story was true. I'd met him in our lobby asking for money. I'd seen him in the grips of addiction, trembling, wanting money for drugs. I'd said no – sent him away empty-handed, but I'd entrusted him to God's care.

God found him. God changed him. Calling on the name of Jesus he is no longer wandering in a far land on a "Vacation Gone Wrong" he's come home. May our Loving Lord and God, by His mercy, set us free from the chains of fear that bind us, defend us from all evil and open our ears to the cries of a wounded world.

AMEN